



Proverbs - Introduction

INTRODUCTION

I. THE NATURE AND USE OF PROVERBS.--A proverb is a pithy sentence, concisely expressing some well-established truth susceptible of various illustrations and applications. The word is of Latin derivation, literally meaning *for a word, speech, or discourse*; that is, one expression for many. The *Hebrew* word for "proverb" (*mashal*) means a "comparison." Many suppose it was used, because the form or matter of the proverb, or both, involved the idea of *comparison*. Most of the proverbs are in couplets or triplets, or some modifications of them, the members of which correspond in structure and length, as if arranged to be compared one with another. They illustrate the varieties of parallelism, a distinguishing feature of *Hebrew* poetry. Many also clearly involve the idea of comparison in the sentiments expressed (compare Proverbs 12:1-10 ; 25:10-15 ; 26:1-9 omission of one member of the comparison, exercising the reader's sagacity or study for its supply, presents the proverb as a "riddle" or "dark saying" (compare Proverbs 30:15-33 ; 1:6 ; Psalms 49:4 form of expression, which thus became a marked feature of the proverbial style, was also adopted for continuous discourse, even when not always preserving traces of comparison, either in form or matter (compare Proverbs 1:1-9:18 word properly translated "parable," to designate an illustrative discourse. Then the *Greek* translators have used a word, *parabola* ("parable"), which the gospel writers (except John) employ for our Lord's discourses of the same character, and which also seems to involve the idea of comparison, though that may not be its primary meaning. It might seem, therefore, that the proverbial and parabolic styles of writing were originally and essentially the same. The proverb is a "concentrated parable, and the parable an extension of the proverb by a full illustration." The proverb is thus the moral or theme of a parable, which sometimes precedes it, as in Matthew 19:30 Proverbs 20:1 style being poetical, and adapted to the expression of a high order of poetical sentiment, such as prophecy, we find the same term used to designate such compositions (compare Numbers 23:7 ; Micah 2:4 ; Habakkuk 2:6

Though the *Hebrews* used the same term for proverb and parable, the *Greek* employs two, though the sacred writers have not always appeared to recognize a distinction. The term for proverb is, *paroimia*, which the *Greek* translators employ for the title of this book, evidently with special reference to the later definition of a proverb, as a trite, sententious form of speech, which appears to be the best meaning of the term. John uses the same term to designate our Saviour's instructions, in view of their characteristic obscurity (compare Proverbs 16:25-29 and even for his illustrative discourses (Proverbs 10:6 sense was not at once obvious to all his hearers. This form of instruction was well adapted to aid the learner. The parallel structure of sentences, the repetition, contrast, or comparison of thought, were all calculated to facilitate the efforts of memory; and precepts of practical wisdom which, extended into logical discourses, might have failed to make abiding impressions by reason of their length or complicated character, were thus compressed into pithy, and, for the most part, very plain statements. Such a mode of instruction has distinguished the written or traditional literature of all nations, and was, and still is, peculiarly current in the East.

In this book, however, we are supplied with a proverbial wisdom commended by the seal of divine inspiration. God has condescended to become our teacher on the practical affairs belonging to all the relations of life. He has adapted His instruction to the plain and unlettered, and presented, in this striking

and impressive method, the great principles of duty to Him and to our fellow men. To the prime motive of all right conduct, the fear of God, are added all lawful and subordinate incentives, such as honor, interest, love, fear, and natural affection. Besides the terror excited by an apprehension of God's justly provoked judgments, we are warned against evil-doing by the exhibition of the inevitable temporal results of impiety, injustice, profligacy, idleness, laziness, indolence, drunkenness, and debauchery. To the rewards of true piety which follow in eternity, are promised the peace, security, love, and approbation of the good, and the comforts of a clear conscience, which render this life truly happy.

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